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AUTHOR Midlarsky, Elizabeth; Oliner, Samuel P.
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ABSTRACT

Recent research indicates that helping others is associated with competence, personal control, and a sense of well-being and that the elderly often express altruistic attitudes and help others. The current period, 40 years after the termination of World War II, presents a final opportunity to study those individuals who had engaged in extreme self-sacrifice earlier in their lives, and to investigate the impact of heroic behavior on well-being during the later years. A theoretical model depicting causal links among antecedents, heroic behaviors and outcomes is hypothesized. The proposed set of relationships is based on concepts derived from theories of the reciprocal nature of social interaction, competence theory, and distinctions drawn between a primary reliance on situational factors versus internalized motives as determinants of heroic actions. Authenticated rescuers, persons engaged in general resistance activities, and persons neither engaged in rescue nor resistance activities, all of whom lived in Europe during the Holocaust, were interviewed to test the hypothesis. Results revealed that authenticated rescuers engaged in a greater variety of helping activities compared with others. Preliminary findings offer additional support for the model which predicts that the competent rescuer would experience an increased sense of efficacy into old age. Statistical analysis will be performed later. (Author/ABL)

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The Aged Samaritan:

Heroes of the Holocaust Forty Years Later

Elizabeth Midlarsky

University of Detroit

Samuel P. Oliner

Humboldt State University

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Presented at the 1985 Annual Convention, Los Angeles.

Running Head: THE AGED SAMARITAN

Abstract

The current period, forty years after the termination of World War II, presents a final opportunity to study those individuals who engaged in extreme self-sacrifice earlier in their lives, and to investigate the impact of heroic behavior on well-being during the later years. This paper presents a theoretical model depicting causal links among antecedents, heroic behaviors and outcomes. The proposed set of relationships is based on concepts derived from theories of the reciprocal nature of social interaction, competence theory, and distinctions drawn between a primary reliance on situational factors vs. internalized motives as determinants of heroic actions.

The Aged Samaritan:

Heroes of the Holocaust Forty Years Later

In recent research, numerous elderly have been found to express altruistic attitudes (Midlarsky & Kahana, 1981), and to engage in helping behavior (Wentowski, 1981; Prohaska & McAuley, 1984; Kahana & Midlarsky, 1983; Stewart & Smith, 1984). For at least a sizable subset of respondents, helping appears to be an activity not only manifested following retirement, in response to the loss of other social roles, but in many cases represents a continuation of lifelong patterns (Chambre, 1984; Harris, 1982; Midlarsky & Kahana, 1984). Now, involvement in the helping of others has been found in numerous investigations to be associated with competence, personal control and the sense of well-being (Eibl-Eibesfeldt, 1972; Press & McKool, 1972; Saltz, 1971; Trimakas & Micolay, 1974). However, despite the importance of these factors in the lives of the elderly, few investigations have heretofore been devoted to the exploration of involvement in humanitarian activity during the younger years on patterns of helping and psychosocial outcomes among the elderly.

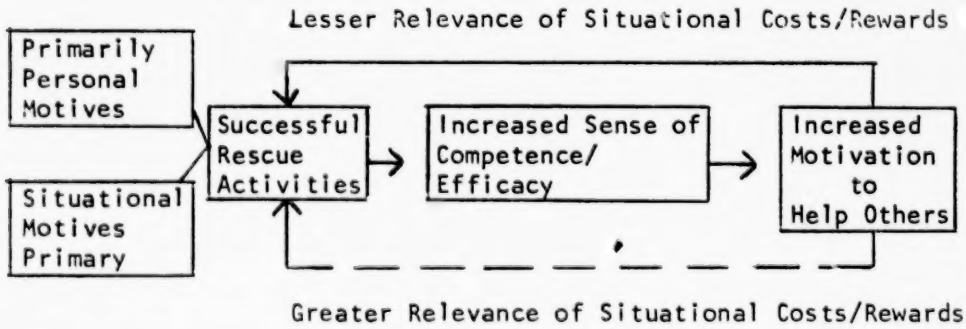
The interest in studying the aged Samaitan is derived, in part, from the recognition that our incredibly complex species has the potential to be not only reactor but also actor and creator within the social realm. Indeed, there is increasing support for the notion that social interaction is a reciprocal process whereby the behaviors emitted by individuals may be determinants of their own future responses and destinies (Bandura, 1980; Deci, 1980;

Klinger, 1977; Lerner & Busch-Rossnagel, 1981). Involvement in dramatic rescue activities on behalf of others in one's younger years may therefore be expected to have consequences for one's future, well into old age.

The potential for individuals to make critical contributions to the welfare of others is nowhere more apparent than among rescuers during the Holocaust. During a period in which expressions of inutterable bestiality reached their apex, an inspiring chapter was written by those gentiles who reached out to rescue their Jewish neighbors--at risk, or even sacrifice of their lives. Rescuers ranged widely in backgrounds and in the precise nature of their deeds--from Raoul Wallenberg, member of an aristocratic Swedish family, who saved thousands of Jews from the death trains leaving Budapest (Bierman, 1981), to the Ukrainian peasant woman who sheltered her neighbor (Eisenberg, 1982), and the Todors of Yugoslavia who hid a Jewish family and arranged for their escape (Meschman, 1964).

Forty years after the termination of World War II, the decent, righteous and often heroic rescuers who still survive are among the elderly population. It is in regard to this group-whose wartime activities have often been well-documented in the annals of the Martyrs' and Heroes' Remembrance in Yad Vashem, Israel--that we are investigating subsequent behaviors and current outcomes.

The cross-national survey research project of rescuers (Oliner, 1983a) is based on a theoretical model depicting a reciprocal relationship between the sense of personal efficacy or competence, and helping (Midlarsky, 1984). This model consists of a blending of theoretical and empirical perspectives regarding the relationship between competence and helping (Midlarsky, 1984), in combination with Oliner's (1983b) distinction between rescuers whose helping was primarily undertaken on their own initiative, in contrast to those whom he termed "situational helpers".[1] The model is depicted below.[2]


Lesser Relevance of Situational Costs/Rewards
Primarily Personal Motives
Situational Motives Primary
Successful Rescue Activities
Increased Sense of Competence/ Efficacy
Increased Motivation to Help Others
Greater Relevance of Situational Costs/Rewards

While several of the causal links in the model have been previously tested, this is the first time that the entire model is being investigated, in regard to this group of heroic rescuers.

In brief, the model predicts that the competent rescuer, who perceived that his or her efforts were successful on behalf of others, would experience an increased sense of efficacy. This would be followed, in turn, by increased motivation to engage in social action on behalf of others. The augmentation of the

helping motivation would increase the probability that additional help would be given during the person's lifetime, even though fewer opportunities might exist, following the termination of the atrocities. Individuals originally spurred by an intrinsic desire to help rather than by situational factors, would have a higher probability of continuing to engage in helping because of their lesser dependency on situational factors. That is, they might seek out opportunities to be of service, even in situations (a quiet suburb) and during periods of their lives (e.g., old age) when opportunities to be of service may have declined in frequency.

Consider, for example, Anna B., who came from a secure, middle class home in Holland, and whose mother was an informal resource person for any neighbors in trouble. It seemed natural that Anna should choose a career in social work. During the war, Anna sought out opportunities to hide and feed large numbers of Jewish children, and to arrange for them to be smuggled out of Holland whenever possible. For many years after the war, Anna was engaged in both formal and informal helping activities; even now, as an aging widow, her neighbors describe frequent instances in which she goes out of her way on behalf of others. When asked to describe a memorable experience during the past year, she chose an incident in which she saved the life of a neighbor by administering CPR when he had a heart attack. She has spoken to none of her neighbors about her wartime activities because "they were, after

all, what anyone would do. If we don't help others, then why are we here, after all?" Anna's responses on personality instruments indicate that she has high self-esteem, manifests internal locus of control, and experiences a high level of social integration.

In contrast to Anna is Stan, who lived close to the Warsaw Ghetto, and was approached by people, obviously Jews, begging for food. He refused because he didn't want to jeopardize his own family's safety and material welfare. However, one day he witnessed the brutal murder of a young man with whom he had been in school and later gave food to that man's brother, when approached. He recalls an incident after the war when in response to his priest's request, he took in a foster child until a permanent placement could be found. Stan, now retired, recently helped a neighbor fill out his tax return upon being asked. He then made similar offers to other neighbhors. Stan's responses indicate moderately high self-esteem, a locus of control score close to the median, and responses indicating that he feels well-integrated into his family and community. Stan reports that helping makes him feel worthwhile.

Sari recalls the war quite vividly, and remembers feeling horrified by the atrocities although she never liked Jews. Her family of origin is described as warm and secure, but as uninvolved as possible in wartime or community affairs. She still gives more than she receives within her family, but engages in little helping

outside her family. Sari suffers from no major health problems but, especially in contrast to Anna, seems concerned about her health. She feels well-integrated into the life of her family, but is not very comfortable with people outside the family. She says that she worries about the future, sometimes expresses fatalistic attitudes, and is below the median in self-esteem and locus of control (i.e., is an external controller).

A general prediction of this study is that those who demonstrated the courage necessary to engage in effective helping during the Holocaust, manifested a sense of mastery to themselves as well as to the recipients of their efforts. The sense of mastery and efficacy may yet be reverberating into the old age of the helpers. For still others, in addition to an enhancement of perceived competence as a result of their earlier rescue efforts, a habit of helping may have been set in motion, which may continue to contribute to the individual's sense of the meaningfulness and value of his or her own life.

Method

The sample in the on-going investigation consists of a subset of rescuers and others who were living in Europe during the period of the Holocaust. Rescuers in this analysis include only those authenticated by Yad Vashem in Israel as having risked their lives without monetary compensation. The process for such identification requires that the rescued person write a letter to Yad Vashem

declaring that the rescuer did indeed meet these criteria. Others who are being interviewed include persons who were involved in general resistance activities, and those who report neither rescue nor resistance activities as well as persons who claim to be rescuers but have not been so identified by Yad Vashem. Respondents are interviewed by means of an open and closed-ended questionnaire developed specifically for the project. Each interview takes between three to five hours.

Questions selected for data analysis for the purposes of this preliminary assessment of the prediction that a competent rescuer would experience an increased sense of efficacy include the following: "Are you now involved in helping activities in the community or have you been so over the last five years?" and if the answer is in the affirmative, "What types of things are you now doing or have done over the last five years?"

Preliminary Results and Discussion

Preliminary findings from this small sample are presented in Tables 1 and 2. These include a slightly larger percentage of authenticated rescuers (55 percent) as compared with others (50 percent) are engaged now in helping activities or have been so over the past five years. However, this very first look at the data is being done in the most conservative fashion. That is, a number of the "others" were reportedly helpers, despite the lack of current authentication by Yad Vashem.

In regard to the number of different activities engaged in, even in this conservative tabulation, authenticated rescuers engage in a greater variety of helping activities as compared with others. Somewhat more than 40 percent of rescuers as compared with less than 10 percent of others report at least two different types of helping activities in which they are currently engaged or have been over the last five years. Statistical analyses will be performed at a later time, when the data from the diverse countries in which the study is being conducted, are fully collected.

In sum, preliminary findings reported in this study offer additional support for the model which predicts that the competent rescuer would experience an increased sense of efficacy which reverberates into old age. Feelings of efficacy are not reflected in whether or not rescuers as compared with others are currently engaged in helping activities, but rather in relation to the varied number of activities undertaken. According to the competence--helping model (Midlarsky, 1984), persons experiencing a sense of competence and efficacy are more likely to risk engagement in multiple tasks involving diverse skills. Even in these initial findings, authenticated rescuers appear to engage in a greater diversity of helping activities in their old age--a dimension of helping found in prior studies to be related to altruism and to self-esteem (Midlarsky & Kahana, 1981).

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Footnotes

[1]Oliner (1983b) distinguishes one group of rescuers who had a happy and secure childhood in which they learned compassion and tolerance for others, from a second who were also loved and secure, but had a marginal status within their society. That is, they acted in accordance with their moral consciences, rather than conforming to the social prejudices of their neighbors. A third group, termed "situational helpers", were spurred to action not by their intrinsic predisposition to initiate helpful actions, but because they were privy to scenes of abuse, which they had obvious means to alleviate.

[2]This figure depicts only the outcomes for those who helped, and whose efforts were effective. Initial speculations about the results of failures to act, and of helping that fails, are presented elsewhere (Midlarsky, 1984).

Table 1

Helping Activities Today: Rescuers and Others

	Helping Today	Not Helping Today
Rescuers (n = 101)	56 (55%)	45 (45%)
Others (n = 22)	11 (50%)	11 (50%)

Table 2

Number of Different Types of Helping Activities Reported: Rescuers and Others

	1 Activity	2 Activities	3 Activities	4 Activities
Rescuers (n = 56)	33 (59%)	18 (32%)	4 (7%)	1 (3%)
Others (n = 11)	10 (91%)	1 (9%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)